

2015

Learning How to Inherit in Colonized and Ecologically Challenged Life Worlds in Early Childhood Education

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Citation of this paper:

Pacini-Ketchabaw, Veronica; Taylor, Affrica; Blaise, Mindy; and de Finney, Sandrina, "Learning How to Inherit in Colonized and Ecologically Challenged Life Worlds in Early Childhood Education" (2015). *Education Publications*. 21.
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Learning How to Inherit in Colonized and Ecologically Challenged Life Worlds in Early Childhood Education: An Introduction

Special Issue

To be published in *Canadian Children* Vol. 40 No. 2

<http://www.cayc.ca/content/canadian-children-vol-40-no-2>

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The complex and intensifying ecological challenges of the 21st century call for new ways of thinking, being, and doing in all sectors of our society, including early childhood education, and the Aboriginal environmental humanities offer alternative ways of being present and acting in the world. Accordingly, in September 2014 we gathered for three days in Victoria, British Columbia, with leading Indigenous and environmental humanities scholars and a group of 40 early childhood scholars, educators, and students to mobilize these perspectives in the early education of young children. This special issue presents eight articles inspired by the conversations that took place at the “Learning How to Inherit in Colonized and Ecologically Challenged Life Worlds” symposium.¹

Like the articles in this special issue, the symposium covered topics such as place and agency in Indigenous cosmologies, Canada’s waste legacies, cohabiting with other species in a time of mass extinctions, and Indigenous modes of inheritance, from new to old in a time of immateriality and precarity.² Early childhood scholars and educators (including the authors in this special issue) considered how they might respond to these issues in their work with young children within their local “common world” environments by addressing:

- the responsibility of early childhood education to address intergenerational ecological justice in the Anthropocene (see Ashton; Duncan; Nelson, Coon, & Chadwick; Hamm; and Nxumalo Oh, Hughes, & Bhanji)
- the pedagogical significance of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children’s relations with place, plants, and animals (see Duncan; Hamm; and Nxumalo Oh, Hughes, & Bhanji)
- the pedagogical significance of place and belonging in early childhood education (see Ashton; Yazbeck & Danis; Duncan; Hamm; and Atkinson)
- pedagogical strategies for dealing with waste in early childhood settings (see Hodgins)
- the ethics of young children’s relationships with animals that are threatened and/or not easy to live with (see Atkinson; and Nxumalo Oh, Hughes, & Bhanji)

¹ This symposium, organized by the Common World Childhoods Research Collective, was funded by the Canadian Social Science and Humanities Research Council, the Centre for Global Studies (University of Victoria, BC), and the Centre for Asian and Pacific Research Initiatives (University of Victoria, BC).

² Keynotes are available on our Common World Childhoods Research Collective website at <http://commonworlds.net/>

The discussions in the symposium were inspired by the collaborations that the authors and we (editors) are engaged in through the Common World Childhoods Research Collective, a network of practitioners concerned with children's relations with the more-than-human world. In the rest of this introduction, we introduce the framing ideas that the authors deploy from these collaborations.

Exciting new dialogues and synergies have recently emerged among the Aboriginal and environmental humanities, motivated by the intensifying ecological challenges we all now face. Scholars in the Aboriginal and environmental humanities (Battiste, 2002; Haraway, 2008; Hird, 2012, 2013; Povinelli, 2012a, 2012b; Rose, 2013; Watts, 2013) increasingly refer to *the Anthropocene*, a new geological era in which human activities have fundamentally changed the earth's systems (Steffen et al., 2007). The premise of these dialogues is that we cannot carry on as we have in the past—we need to find new ways of thinking, acting, and relating to the rest of the world as human beings. Scholars in the Aboriginal and environmental humanities, often in consultation with Aboriginal communities, are leading the way in theorizing the social, cultural, and ethical implications of the interdependencies and mutual vulnerabilities of humans, other life forms, and the earth's geo-ecological systems. They challenge us to learn “how to inherit” (Haraway, 2012) these entangled legacies. They also call for rethinking the human as an integral part of geo-ecological systems, and repositioning geo-ecological systems within the domain of ethics and responsibility (Rose et al., 2012).

The challenges of the Anthropocene have clear implications for the field of early childhood education. Children in contemporary early childhood settings are inheriting increasingly complex and challenging common worlds, but mainstream Euro-Western pedagogies seldom support children to engage meaningfully with them. Primarily informed by Piaget's (1928) early 20th-century child developmental theories, 21st-century Western early childhood education is resolutely committed to individually focused child-centred learning (Blaise, 2010; Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2011). Such understandings are incommensurable with Indigenous notions of the inseparable connectedness of children and the world (Martin, 2007; Ritchie & Rau, 2010), and conflict with contemporary ecological understandings of human embeddedness in the environment that we addressed above.

Because these developmental theories stem from the same “progress and development” thinking that drove European colonization and precipitated the human-caused ecological crisis we now face, they cannot accommodate the paradigm shift we seek for 21st-century children (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Taylor, forthcoming; Taylor, Blaise, & Giugni, 2013; Taylor, Pacini-Ketchabaw, & Blaise, 2012). This is not to say that child development theory is oblivious to contemporary environmental concerns. Within the overarching field of developmental psychology, exponents of direct nature experiences in early childhood (Dau, 2005; Davis, 2010; Elliott, 2008; Wilson, 2011) argue that environmental education promotes children's physical and emotional development and encourages young children to form the emotional attachments with nature that are necessary for environmental stewardship (Chawla, 2006; Sobel, 2008).

Boosted by rising concerns about the threat of “nature-deficit disorder” in the digital age (Louv, 2008), many Canadian early childhood educators look to northern Europe's “all-weather outside” or nature kindergartens (Änggård, 2010; Warden, 2010) as models of nature-based education. Replica forest and nature kindergartens are increasingly popular in Canada (Pelo, 2013).

However, these programs are seldom attuned to the post- and neocolonial complexities of Canadian “natures” or to the interrelated Indigenous, ecological, and justice perspectives we wish to pursue. While playing an important role in promoting children’s embodied learning “in nature,” most nature kindergartens remain firmly rooted in Western developmental psychology and dualistic, romantic, and idealized Euro-Western notions of nature as separate from culture (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2013; Taylor, 2013). The time is ripe to develop early childhood pedagogies that are situated within, and respond to, children’s lifeworlds.

The articles in this special issue build on the common worlds conceptual framework that we have extrapolated elsewhere (Common World Childhoods Research Collective, 2015; Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2012; Taylor, 2013; Taylor & Giugni, 2012). Children’s common worlds consist of the full gamut of complex relationships, traditions, and legacies that they inherit in the places in which they grow up. These include children’s relationships with their immediate natural and built environments, with the other human and nonhuman beings that share these same environments, and, in settler societies such as Canada, with complex cultural, colonial, and environmental historical traditions and legacies. This inclusive framework resists the nature/culture divide and situates childhoods within entangled human and nonhuman, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, social and environmental issues and concerns. Common worlds differ from the idealized natural worlds usually associated with Romantic Euro-Western traditions of nature and childhood (Taylor, 2013). They are the actual, messy, unequal, and imperfect worlds real children inherit and co-inhabit along with other human and nonhuman beings and entities.

The articles draw particular inspiration from Donna Haraway’s (2008, 2011) modest and grounded eco-philosophies, which entreat us to learn how to inherit and co-inhabit our entangled multispecies worlds and to respond and act in these worlds in ways that allow all to flourish. In working to make the world more sustainable and liveable for all, Haraway (2013) urges us to resist the heroic human rescue and salvation responses to the ecological challenges we face. Instead of seeking techno-fixes and grand solutions to the problems we have created, she urges us to attend to the small, mundane, seemingly insignificant everyday relations in our immediate worlds. Haraway (2008) proposes that by attending to our on-ground everyday small encounters with others (including animals, plants, and places), we can learn to become “more worldly with” these others. She highlights our need to recognize how the world affects us and acts on us—even as we act on it. The authors enact such paradigm-shifting approaches and learnings.

We hope that the articles in this special issue mobilize these interdisciplinary, cross-sector conversations to explore how to rethink early childhood education in response to the new synergies across the Aboriginal and environmental humanities. We also hope that the articles assist early childhood educators to engage meaningfully with the social and ecological challenges that are the legacies of colonialism, so that they can help children to learn how to inherit these challenges.

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